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ABSTRACT

To examine the relationship between student writer and audience, five volunteers from a college freshman composition class were asked to think aloud on tape as they revised three out-of-class drafts of a paper. The subjects gave one protocol after getting feedback on an early draft from their own writing group, another after a student-teacher conference, and a third after receiving feedback from a peer evaluation group. Protocol transcripts were analyzed for audience-related and revising activities. Review of the data revealed a wide range of student responses to peer comments. Case studies of three of the five volunteers showed that one student deliberately ignored his audience's responses, yet indicated no strong sense of authorship; one student made revisions largely independently of his readers' expectations but showed, in his evident self-motivation, a clear sense of writing ownership; and a third student temporarily lost confidence in her own judgment when confronted with peer criticism. These case studies suggested that peer evaluations are not always beneficial for student writers. Further research is needed on the complex interactions between writers and readers. (MM)

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Student Writers and Their Audiences:
Case Studies of the Revising Decisions of Three College Freshman

Carol Berkenkotter

One of the major difficulties most of us face is helping student writers write for a responsive audience other than the teacher-evaluator. As Nancy Sommers, Lil Brannon, and C. N. Knoblauch have shown, it is all too easy for teachers to appropriate students' texts and the responsibilities of authorship.[1] Donald M. Murray's solution to the problem is to ask teachers to serve students as "writing coaches" who encourage students to read their texts from the perspective of an inquiring reader.[2] Both Sommers and Murray have studied the writing processes of professional writers and recognize the problems that student writers confront when they feel that they lack both the authority over their texts and the means for gaining authorial control.[3]

Other teachers favor turning the classroom into a learning community in which students are each other's primary audience. They contend that students who receive feedback from peers as they move through the subprocesses of composing have a number of advantages: they will experience writing and revising for less threatening audiences than the teacher, and they will learn to discriminate between useful and non-useful feedback and to use their awareness of anticipated audience response as they revise. A peer audience then, can help writers learn to negotiate a way between their readers' suggestions and their own imperatives.

Promising as this approach appears, it raises a number of provocative questions for researchers. For example, how do students interact in their writing groups when the teacher isn't there? How do the interactions between group members, teacher, and writer shape what the writer does when she revises? Can we assume that feedback from multiple audiences will help writers improve their texts?

In order to study student writer/audience relationships, my colleague, Benjamin M. Glassner, and I have spent the last two years gathering protocols from freshman composition students in our classes. We analyzed ten subjects' revising protocols, and listened to tapes of subjects in their writing groups and student teacher conferences. We knew that we needed both kinds of data to gauge the extent to which students' readers' comments affected their revising behaviors. What we didn't anticipate was that our subjects would respond to their readers in significantly different ways depending on the writer's personality, level of maturity, and ability to handle writing problems. Nor did we realize that out of their transactions with their readers some students would assert their proprietary rights over their texts while others would gain—or lose—a sense of authority. The cases of Stan, Pat, and Joann best illustrate how these distinctively different processes occur.

Stan: The Resisting Revisor

Of all the subjects Stan was the most reluctant to alter any of his drafts other than substituting pronouns and adding or deleting words, phrases, and an occasional paragraph. None of his revisions altered the meaning of his text. Stan's essay dealt with "the good life" as it is pictured on television. He claimed that the medium projected a distorted view of reality by constantly showing beautiful people in luxurious settings out of the reach of most viewers. Having made this point in his first paragraph, he reiterated it throughout his essay using quotations from a television critic for support.

After they read an early draft of his paper, his group told him they liked his idea. They also advised him to incorporate many more examples (rather than quotations) as evidence. In response to their comments, Stan

asserted in his first protocol that he didn't see the need to rewrite. With the exception of making a few references to his group's comments and jotting minor lexical and spelling changes as he read his draft aloud, he appeared convinced that he had "said what I needed to say." Anticipating another writing group's response, Stan took the defensive: "None of the assholes in that class are going to agree with me. I hope to raise hell with this paper. Bull-shit. It's my opinion. Everyone has their own opinion." At the end of the protocol, however, his tone became less abrasive:

> I hope I can . . . do better and better on the next tape. I don't figure I should get so bored on these . . . After I talk to Carol I will rewrite my paper. Type it up. Then I'll get it back with comments and then do another protocol.

Stan gave his second protocol after he had received criticism from a peer evaluation group. During that same session in his group protocols he was extremely critical of the papers the group read, frequently without reason. Finally, Dave S. suggested, "Stan, you need to relax a bit." But Stan was not about to be deterred. "Bullshit," he replied. "I'm in a good mood for critiquing this morning." Stan's aggressive behavior and his use of expletives suggests that he enjoyed the feeling of power that the role of peer evaluator gave him. Finding himself on the receiving end of another group's criticism, however, upset him. During his protocol he reported:

"I don't really know what I am going to do today because in group critique in the peer evaluation group I got sucked to put it mildly." But he does not review the group's comments. Instead he decides to read his paper again and "look for weaknesses myself and correct a couple. So I really don't have that much to do today." He reads his paper, indicating his concern over his word choice at one point and adding two words at

another. Finishing, he replays the tape following along with his paper and making a few grammatical changes. After hearing himself on tape he observes: "I really do think it is pretty good . . . just changed the pronoun. No big deal." After a pause he reviews what the peer evaluation group has written.

(Reading the questions on the evaluation report)[3] In the first part. What do you see as the greatest strength in your paper? They say my title and some good quotes. Big deal. That's all they wrote. Then on the back it says, What do you see is the greatest weakness? Again, point out specific passages in your paper and discuss why. Let the reader/writer know what questions you have that still need to be addressed. They say I have too many quotes. Not enough of my own opinion. This whole damn paper is my own opinion. I just use what other people have said to back me up because I title my paper, "What do you think?" You know, what do you think? Do you think that it is true or not true that t.v. does form the way you think? . . . It kind of goes along with the first paragraph too. But it is a two way title. I have always been taught to use quotes and shit to back up how you feel. You can't just go on the limb on your own intuition . . . and say "I think it does. Why? Just because I say so." . . . Now that don't work. You've got to have kind of proof or evidence and that's why I slipped in the 22,000 hours and the quotes. Now here the other groups say that I need more specific situations. More about a specific situation . . . I've got about a quarter of a page on a specific situation on a two page paper. I thought that was enough with the quote from Chris Stoer. I think that is a

pretty good quote. I don't really feel the need to rewrite my paper. It's really a bunch I think . . . shit.

Stan made a deliberate choice to disregard what his audience told him, a choice that he stuck with in his third protocol even after I asked him in conference, "Where are you in this paper, Stan? I don't see you. All I see are quotations from someone else to support what you say. Can you make this more personal when you revise? Maybe use some examples from your own experience." Instead, Stan opted to make his current draft "more personal" by changing the second person pronouns throughout to the first person, and adding a few passages about how his grandparents' values were not shaped by television the way he believes values of the current generation are. Throughout the protocol he insists on the primacy of the changes he has made over his anticipated response of his readers. ". . . My own experience. They aren't going to believe it. They aren't going to know if it happened to me or not. Though it's close enough."

In one sense Stan can be said to be asserting "ownership" over his paper, that is, the right to make his own choice about how much to revise. Stan, however, never accepted the responsibility for critically reading his text. Had he done so, he might have realized his readers' suggestions to include examples and to make them personal would have helped him buttress his central point. Furthermore, Stan's insistent criticism of others' papers, criticism that was frequently unsupported by evidence or constructive suggestions for revision seems linked with his inability to respond positively to the feedback he receives from peer readers and his instructor. Stan is locked in the myopia of his own perceptions. His response to his readers suggests that some student writers do not develop

the sense of responsibility to their texts that we see in experienced adult writers.

Pat: The Internal Revisor[4]

If Stan was too ego-centered to let his readers help him, Pat's case, in contrast, demonstrates that we cannot assume that peer feedback will necessarily help writers improve their texts. Some students march to the beat of a different drummer. Once they discover their subject, they become their own best audience. Pat read to his group an account of the adventures he and a high school friend had on their motorcycles. His peers were pleased with what he had written and concurred that he had a good draft which needed only more detail. Pat was not satisfied, however. Perhaps he sensed a latent intention he had not expressed. In conference, he voiced his dissatisfaction, yet he echoed his readers asking if he should include more detail about his friend to "bind the whole thing together." What did your friend look like," I asked. "I'd like to see him."

"Finn was two years older than I was." On the tape his voice becomes more emphatic. "He'd been in trouble. Bad trouble. He had done some bad things. But he wasn't a bad guy." Shortly after telling me this Pat left my office and went to give his protocol. He began by saying:

> I have decided to change my whole story around. The focus of my other story was very weak. The dates were hard to follow. It was lurchy. It was not me. There was one other main problem. It didn't seem very good to me. I was displeased with the way that it went and the way that it read. It was awfully short. I have decided to write about a person I mentioned in the first draft. It was Finn and me. I am going to write about him and some of the things we did.

Pat tacitly knew a great deal about Finn, his problems, and their friendship. Yet he did not realize that Finn was his subject; in fact, he had internalized his readers' interest in seeing more detail about their adventures. My accidental question prompted him to name his friend, an act which triggered a powerful recollection. Sensing the gap between his vivid memories of their relationship and his description in the draft, he reconceived the subject of his paper.[5]

Once having determined to write about Finn and their friendship, Pat felt the first tug of resistance against his readers. He rejected my suggestion to rearrange his material:

> It would be really hard to put this into chronological order in spite of what you said because you wouldn't be able to make entire paragraphs out of what was going on . . . that part there you couldn't make two paragraphs out of there. It would have to go in before the paragraph when I met him and that would . . . I don't like to follow a paper that way. That's great too but for now I think that I am just going to learn it that way.

After hearing his writing group criticize the narrative of another writer because it was too personal he asserted:

> If that is what a person wants to write about that's great because my paper is on reflections too, on my memories. If people don't like it, they don't have to read it, you know. It's important to me and it's important to her and there is nothing wrong with that and I just wanted to say that before I started my protocol.

Pat's sense of authority grew out of the commitment he made to write about his friendship with Finn. This commitment brought with it a feeling of responsibility to his text, so strong that he chose to make decisions independent of his readers' expectations. And although the readers might have helped him, they did not possess his clear sense of his subject. Pat demonstrates that some writers revise out of a sense of internal necessity. Other writers, however, may be other-directed. Extremely sensitive to the needs and expectations of their readers, they may be vulnerable to misdirected criticism. The effect that this kind of feedback can have on the sense of authority of the writer can best be seen in Joann's case.

Joann: A Crisis of Authority

Of all the writers in the sample Joann was the most responsive to the comments of her readers. She also spent the most time integrating her responses into her revising activities. Her keen awareness of her readers' needs made her willing to cooperate with her writing group's suggestion that she include more concrete detail in her paper, a description of her first trip in a canoe. Even when they asked her to include in dialogue form the "obscenities" that she and a friend had shouted at some water skiers who had nearly capsized their boat, Joann reluctantly scoured her memory. Unable to recall what they had said, she decided to make something up and spent several minutes on one protocol listing all the "vulgarity" she could think of. She jokingly concluded that she had "learned to write obscenities in English 101." Unfortunately for her, when a peer evaluation group read her essay, they became overly zealous in their criticism. Observing that her paper contained some good description, they asked her for more, often in places where it was unnecessary or inappropriate. For example, as she watched children fishing in an open culvert from her canoe, Joann had

observed, "Too bad we didn't bring our fishing poles." Her readers commented, "Dull! Must describe."

Joann found herself hard pressed to accommodate her readers' expectations. But in response to a similar suggestion she questioned their judgement, addressing them directly:

> How can you say that? I don't understand. Okay. (Reading their comments) Show that 'we relaxed awhile and set out again.' How can you show that? You just relax . . . Okay . . . How can you . . . I can see showing 'we were physically and mentally exhausted' (another suggestion), but . . . hmm . . . well sorry guys but I am gonna have to let that one go.

Finding many of her readers' expectations impossible to fulfill, Joann began to express doubt about the value of her work: "I am glad that I didn't put my name on my paper . . . oh I did. They know who I am . . . I don't like this paper. Wish I hadn't written on this." She managed to pull herself together, however, and as she read her paper aloud her feelings of confidence returned:

> The water gleamed in the evening sun reflecting every image surrounding it. Every tree, house, and cloud in the sky seem to be taken in by the lake. Warmed by a full day of sunshine the water seemed to caress our paddles as we glided along. I am not going to touch that. I like that paragraph. (Emphasis mine)

These excerpts show Joann temporarily losing her authority because she took her readers' judgement seriously, even when she questioned it. Rather than taking the offensive (as Stan would have) or asserting her authority

(as Pat did) she lost confidence. But Joann wasn't about to abandon her text. And as she reread her first page, she was able to reaffirm her faith in her prose. ("I'm not going to touch that. I like that.") Regaining her control over what she was doing, she then was in a position to assess which of her readers' suggestions she could use:

> Let's see here . . . They wanted me to describe 'physically and mentally exhausted.' How? (Reading) When they finally left us alone, we were both physically and mentally exhausted. How can I describe that? With tired limbs . . . I like that. Tired limbs . . . We were both . . . maybe I could just put 'exhausted'. No . . . physically and mentally exhausted with tired limbs and foggy brains? . . . How would your brain be when you are mentally exhausted? I always feel funny after a test. Fuzzy brains. That is a good way to describe a brain--fuzzy. What the heck. And fuzzy brains.

Joann easily retrieves the terms she needs to describe "physically and mentally exhausted." She is not so amenable, however, to her readers' next suggestion to show how she and her friend relaxed on an abandoned barge: "I am afraid folks. I can not show anymore details this time." Nevertheless, she tries:

> Relaxed. What do you do when you relax? You lay down, right? We laid and relaxed, no we just relaxed. We sat there and drank a beer and had a cigarette. I am not going to put that in my paper. You aren't supposed to have beer out in the boats with you anyway.

process through which writers gain authority over their texts. For example, under what conditions do they first experience the need for authority? How do they demonstrate it? How do they use it? Toward what end? Finally, how might a writer with a newly awakened sense of authority be guided by others' advice? These are some of the questions researchers need to explore before we can begin to assess which kinds of writer/reader relationships best serve the writer, and how teachers may translate this information into an effective classroom pedagogy.

NOTES

[1]See "Responding to Student Writing," and "On Students' Rights to Their Own Texts: A Model of Teacher Response," College Composition and Communication, 33 (May, 1982), 148-156 and 157-166.

[2]"Teaching the Other Self: The Writer's First Reader," College Composition and Communication, 33 (May, 1982), 143-147.

[3]The material italicized in the excerpts from these transcripts is text the subject is writing. The material italicized and underlined is reading that already has been written.

[4]Donald M. Murray suggests that in part the difference between what he calls internal and external revision lies in whether the writer's eye is turned inward or toward his audience. "Internal Revision: A Process of Discovery," Research on Composing: Points of Departure, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978), p. 91.

[5]For a description of this process see Carol Berkenkotter, "Decisions and Revisions: The Planning Strategies of a Publishing Writer," College Composition and Communication, 34 (May, 1983), 162-163. I should note that Donald M. Murray frequently and systematically reread his text from the perspective of a critical reader. This behavior led him to reconceive his goals as he wrote.